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A Chew of Sugarcane **Ahmad Kotot's *Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan****

Hendrik M. J. MAIER**

The tale is called *Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan*, a tale of youthful love. It was written by Ahmad Kotot, and published in two installments of 1,000 copies each by a printing house called al-Matbaah al-Rawzah al-Islam wa syarikah in 1927 and 1928, respectively. It was presented in Arabic script, at the time still the more common form of writing in the Malay heartland. Place of publication: Seremban, a small town on the Malay Peninsula. The honorarium for the author: 50 copies; he was supposed to sell or give these away among his relatives and friends. History does not tell us how much Ahmad Kotot earned from them. *Hikayat percintaan* probably did not make him a rich man, but it found readers: the book was soon sold out. At the time, however, it was not reprinted, and its echoes were to drown in the wave of publications that swept over the Malay Peninsula in the 30s.

Information about Ahmad Kotot is scanty. He was born in 1901 and lived in the Sultanate of Pahang most of his life. After an unfinished training as a teacher at the well-respected Malay College in Malacca he worked as a headmaster in various schools in Pahang; in the late 40s he retired and started a small trading company in Jerantut. In the meantime he had continued telling tales; some of them were allegedly published as books, others as articles in newspapers. In the 50s he became a local correspondent for the Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*. Ahmad Kotot died some years ago. That is about all the books tell us about him [cf. Wajah 1981: 112-115].

Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan is the only one of Ahmad Kotot's tales that is rather easily available to the modern reader: a Romanized version of the original was published in Kuala Lumpur in 1975, this time not only with the original preface of the author himself but also with an introduction of the editor, A. Bakar Hamid. Kotot's other tales have disappeared; for good, it seems. Vanished in the air, we could say, as becomes the tellers of tales and their creations. Hard to find, as Malaysians say; Kotot's tales shared the fate of so many of the tales that were published on the Peninsula in the 20s and 30s: often nothing but their titles have been preserved. "In our reading," Kotot tells us in the coda of his *Hikayat*, "we should select whatever is useful and beneficial, it is like eating a stick of sugarcane; the bad parts we should throw away, or at least we should not chew on them, and usually people throw away the refuse as well." Apparently, most of what he wrote was regarded as refuse, maybe not even worth a chew.

* An earlier version of this essay was read by Will Derks and Lenore Launer, for their comments I am very grateful.

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Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan is a juicy and sweet stick of sugarcane indeed. It brought the sound of laughter and giggle into Malay writing. Unfortunately, in Arabic script it drowned too soon and in Romanized script it resurfaced too late to have much impact on Malay literary life. And that is a pity.

* * *

Let us start the discussion of *Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan* in Seremban some 25 years after it was first published there in 1927. One generation later, that is, at the time Ahmad Kotot's son was as old as he himself had been when he wrote his novel. Seremban was no longer an important place of printing activities. Times had definitely changed.

In Seremban, in the very first days of 1952 the second Kongres Persuratan Melayu seMalaya, the second all-Malayan Congress of Malay Writing, was held. Its participants accepted a resolution that had been submitted by the Kesatuan Guru-guru Melayu Singapura (Union of Malay Teachers of Singapore): "we take the decision that it is appropriate to make European (Rumi) writing the official form of writing for Malay, without removing Arabic (Jawi) writing so that time will determine that" [kita mengambil keputusan sudah sepatutnya tulisan Rumi dirasmikan bagi persuratan Melayu dengan tidak menghapuskan tulisan Jawi sehingga masa akan menentukannya] [Memoranda 1962: 30].

The resolution and the Congress' acceptance of it were certainly not the beginning of the end of the Arabic script on the Peninsula. From their strongholds, the British may occasionally have called for its displacement in the name of progress and convenience, Jawi had retained a great authority among writers and pundits as the script of manuscripts, of tradition, of Islam. It has remained in active use up to the present day, and if anything, the Islamic re-orientation that has taken place in the Malay world in recent years has given Jawi a new vigor.

The resolution that was accepted in Seremban was not the beginning of Malay writing in Rumi script on the Peninsula either. Since the turn of the century, an occasional periodical had already made it more familiar as a tool of writing and printing; so had the textbooks in Rumi, published by the Translation Bureau in Tanjung Malim where the pundit Za'ba was playing a leading role in the formation of a standard Malay in the shadow of R.O. Winstedt, the authoritative British scholar-administrator.

Maybe the Seremban resolution could best be regarded as yet another indication of the transformations that were taking place in Malay writing, Malay culture, Malay politics. It could at least serve as an emblem in describing the efforts Malay intellectuals on the Peninsula were undertaking in the 50s to demarcate the start of *sastera Melayu* or *kesusasteraan Melayu*, terms that had emerged among the Dutch educated literati on the neighboring islands in the 30s as the Malay version of the Dutch word *literatuur* and the French term *belles lettres*.

Already before the turn of the century, novel forms of writing had taken off on the Peninsula as well as on the islands. Closely parallel with the differentiation that took place in the Malay press in Batavia and Singapore, however, this novelty was far more intensively

explored in the Dutch Indies where Tirto Adisoerjo and Tan Teng Kie, Lie Kim Hok and Francis were just some of the many who were trying their hand in this novelization of Malay. Seeing and watching became more relevant than listening and hearing; claims of self-expression were gaining preference over claims of perpetuating the wording of manuscripts and religious treatises. This novelization was, of course, closely connected with the use of printing techniques, the rise of formal education, and the intensification of contacts between the native population and the colonial masters; it resulted, among other things, in a corpus of texts that were given the name of *sastera* ("literature"). Most significant in this connection is the fact that the novelty of these forms could very well be defined in terms of script: they were presented in the European script. In the process, the Arabic script was pushed to the margins of the islands; it became associated with "tradition," ancient and old, and as such it was thought to be essentially unable to meet the challenges of the colonial situation.

It took some 20, 30 years until a similar movement away from manuscript writing and tale telling gained momentum on the Peninsula as well; not before the early 50s did the term *sastera* come in use with reference to a certain kind of writing in the European script whereas *persuratan Melayu* (Malay writing) remained primarily connected with Malay texts in the Arabic script. Before long, however, *sastera* became such a familiar word in circles of Malay literati on the Peninsula that *persuratan* passed into disuse and almost everything ever written in the past was given the name of *sastera*, including law texts and religious treatises. The extension of the term has led to much confusion, to many misreadings of what is now called "the Malay heritage."

In Seremban, the Union of Teachers gave voice to an idea that had been brought up time and again ever since the arrival of the British: Malay in the Arabic script (Jawi) should be replaced by Malay in the European or Romanized script (Rumi). Now the time was obviously ripe to have this idea accepted and effectively implemented; with its resolution in favor of the European script, in short, the Union spoke out on the right place, at the right moment. How and why this Union came to present this resolution; who were the people engaged in it; what were their arguments; what kind of discussions preceded its submission — those are questions which involve issues of politics and culture as much as they explain the creation of the concept of *sastera*. So ragged, so unruly are these issues that it is impossible to have them all properly embedded in a tale about Malay writing; they could easily bar every attempt to start chewing the sugarcane of Ahmad Kotot's *Hikayat Percintaan kasih kemudaan*.

Not only was there the growing pressure of the colonial masters who called for a romanization in the name of efficiency and progress. There was also the call for change among the Malays who tended to associate the European script with modernization. And, of course, there was the light of Indonesia; the islands had become an independent nation with Malay as its national language under the name of Indonesian which, presented in European script, was conceived of as the symbol of modernity.

In the 30s and 40s some Peninsular intellectuals had been entertaining more or less concrete dreams of a Malay-speaking, Malay-writing state including both the islands and the

Peninsula. Such dreams, however, had been shattered by politicians in Jakarta, who had never shown much interest for the Peninsula, as well as by British administrators and their closest allies, the Malay Sultans who, in the Emergency that was proclaimed after the start of an allegedly Chinese inspired communist revolt, had been given a central place in the preparations for Independence. The dreams of such a state did not come true, the fascination with Indonesia, however, was to remain strong for a long time to come. The new Republic's political system had a strong appeal, and so did its strong anti-colonial stance, its literature, its language policy. Would the Malays on the Peninsula not be better able to defend themselves against the threat of a Chinese take-over if they knew they were supported by those tens of millions of Malay speaking Indonesians who allegedly were of the Malay race as well?

In Indonesia, the Rumi script had already been generally accepted for writing Malay since the turn of the century, vociferous experts like Asraf and Usman Awang argued again and again in their articles and lectures in the early 50s — and the progress that had been made on the islands in every field of life asked for imitation. Did intellectual life in Indonesia not show an impressive sophistication in comparison with the discussions on the Peninsula, and was this not partly due to the introduction of the European script that had opened the doors to the modern knowledge of Europe? And did the expansive power of Indonesian not show that Rumi was the most practical and effective form of writing, best in accordance with Malay in the present and in the future [*Memoranda* 1962: 14]? If the Malays really wanted to hook up with developments in what was regarded the more advanced world, the argument ran, they had to follow the Indonesian example. It was about time to enter the gateway to modernity and development, in short, and the transition from Jawi to Rumi was regarded a step that had to be made on the Malay race's journey towards prosperity and justice.

The preference of Rumi over Jawi that was formally expressed in Seremban was further strengthened in Singapore during the Third Congress of Malay Language and Writing (Kongres Bahasa dan Persuratan Melayu III) in 1956. The participants confirmed that the turning point in script and spelling had been reached and that the use of Rumi should be more strongly propagated. It was also decided that closer cooperation with Indonesia should be stimulated and that the publication agency that had been founded by the Administration should be given more power in its efforts to coordinate the endeavors that were undertaken everywhere on the Peninsula to stimulate and steer the use of the Malay language, the carrier of a distinct Malay culture. Authorities had proposed the name of Balai Pustaka for this agency, in obvious deference for the Dutch-sponsored publishing house with the same name in Jakarta whose activities had already been followed with great admiration on the Peninsula before the Japanese invasion.

The idea of striving for closer ties with Indonesia, the formal introduction of Rumi being just one of the steps to be taken, was appreciated by almost everyone present in Singapore; so was the idea of an Agency to coordinate efforts to bolster the position of Malay. The Agency's proposed name, however, was rejected. An increasing number of people saw the pre-war Balai Poestaka as an abject tool of colonialism and oppression; moreover, it was about time that

Malaya stood on its own feet. The name of Balai Pustaka was replaced by that of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

In the Congress' resolutions it is stated that DBP should "be the center for guarding the position and development of the Malay language and writing so that the origins of the Malay language will not be affected and in the future it can become the promoter for the development of a people's culture of the Malay lands" [hendaklah menjadi pusat bagi menjaga hal ihwal dan perkembangan bahasa dan persuratan Melayu supaya tidak cacat asal-usul Bahasa Melayu serta menjadi pendorong kepada perkembangan kebudayaan rakyat Tanah Melayu kelak]. Secondly, DBP should aim at laying out a policy to "engineer, open up, and collect the products of Malay literature from ancient times onwards" [menyiasat, membongkar dan mengumpulkan semula serta menghalusi hasil² kesusasteraan Melayu dari semenjak zaman purba] [*ibid.*: 249].

* * *

The working paper that was presented in Singapore as the point of departure for the Congress' resolution in favor of the European script had been written by Asraf and Usman Awang. The working paper about the Agency that should stimulate the use of Malay as a language of culture had been composed by Keris Mas. Asraf, Usman Awang, Keris Mas. All three of them were members of the Asas 50, Angkatan Sasterawan 50, the 1950 Generation of Authors. The ideas they propagated may already have been in the air, but the ease with which their proposals were now accepted suggests eloquence as well as persuasiveness on the part of these young men. In most surveys of the development of the Malay language, the Third Congress of Malay Language and Writing is pictured as the occasion where Asas 50 had some of its main ideas and plans accepted on a national and official level. At the time, the group itself had already fallen apart, yet in the decades to come its ideas and dreams were to resound as its most outspoken members continued to play a leading role in the creation of a Malay literature and language that was strong enough to serve as a prominent instrument of nation-building. An admirable performance. An amazing achievement. An example of effective networking.

Asas 50 had been founded in Singapore on August 6, 1950, perpetuating a bumpy tradition of societies and associations that had appeared and disappeared in various places on the Peninsula since 1880 for the promotion and strengthening of the Malay cause, and of the Malay language in particular. Its main instigator, the schoolteacher Mohd Asriff Ahmad (MAS), took a seat in the executive board, together with younger and upcoming authors like Hamzah, Masuri S.N. and Jymy Asmara. They attracted people of a wide variety of professions who, in one form or another, had literary aspirations and were of the opinion that Malay writing could serve as a crucial tool in defining Malay identity; "Malayness" had to be strong and coherent enough to assure a leading role for the Malay language as well as for the Malays in the independent nation-under-construction.

Some members of Asas 50 — Asraf and Usman Awang among them — also became members of the "Lembaga Bahasa Melayu" (LBM, Institute of the Malay Language), an

organization which, founded on the instigation of the Union of Malay teachers in Singapore, had roughly spoken the same aim as Asas 50: Malayness had to be strengthened. Differences in world-outlook within the Union, however, were considerable. The representatives of Asas 50 publicly presented themselves as "progressives." Calling for a radical transformation of life on the Peninsula in favor of the Malays, they saw literature primarily as a weapon in the struggle against poverty and injustice; concurrently, they tried to formulate prescriptions of how to write. Most of the members of LBM, however, were apparently more interested in the cause of the Malay language alone. They were not so eager to see language as a tool in a social struggle; rather than calling for establishing cultural and political links with Indonesia so as to implement changes in Peninsular society, they preferred to look at the past, at the heritage for inspiration. These differences in opinion notwithstanding, everybody involved agreed that Malay language and literature should be "the tool to unify the nation" (*alat perpaduan bangsa*) in one way or another. The Malay press in Singapore and beyond was all too eager to publish everything on this topic and accommodate a growing reading public that wanted to be provided with suggestions about the species specifics of "Malayness" and "nation," and was willing to pay for that.

Before long, some members of Asas 50 developed the idea of *seni untuk masyarakat*, art for society. Art had to be of the social-realist kind: it had to picture the misery and problems the Malays had to overcome so as to regain control over the Peninsula which, in their view, had been theirs since days of yore. The question of how the Malay speaking communities and groups made part of Peninsular society as a whole — if there effectively was such a constellation at all, given the distrust and tensions among and between Malays, Chinese, Indians, and aboriginals — remained largely unaddressed. In how far the "others" were willing to accept Malay predominance was a question that did not really concern the Malays either; in their opinion, the Malays had the oldest rights on the land, and only Malay could play the role of national language if only because it had been the major language of communication on the Peninsula for ages. Propagated and practiced with great vigor and confidence, some of the ideas of Asas 50 were very close to those that inspired the Institute for People's Culture, Lekra, founded in Jakarta in 1950 by some prominent members of the Communist Party of Indonesia. This correspondence was not a mere coincidence; it is just another example of how much Indonesia served as a source of inspiration. During the State of Emergency (1948-1960), the propagation of these progressive ideas was not always appreciated by the authorities as such strident calls for Malayness and social justice could only bolster the social upheaval the communists were trying to bring about. No wonder a number of intellectuals spent longer or shorter periods of time in prison. No wonder censorship was strict. No wonder the call for Malayness became louder.

The concept of "art for society" could not but give rise to a wide variety of private and public discussions which forced Malay intellectuals to reflect upon the function and role of Malay language, journalism, and literature in society — and upon the literariness of literature. Rifts emerged — partly ideologically inspired, partly based on personal antipathies. Aspiring as well as established authors were forced to take a stand in the discussions about "art for

society" and "art for art" (*seni untuk seni*) which disrupted and then ruined the unity within Asas 50. That is how on the eve of Independence, form and function of the Malay language were hotly debated issues, not only in linguistic and sociological terms, but also in political terms — and they were to remain so for decades to come. The resolutions of the Third Congress in Singapore as advocated by members of Asas 50 and LBM were only one manifestation of the forces that compelled authorities in Kuala Lumpur to take a stand in favor of the Malays in the multi-cultural, multi-racial society of Malaya.

The polemics about the *bangsa Melayu* (Malay nation or Malay race) had been confusing ever since it was made a topic of discussion around the turn of the century in periodicals like *Utusan Melayu*, *al-Imam*, and *al-Ikhwan*. Who belonged to the *bangsa Melayu*, who did not? Differences in definition depended on the starting point taken: Islam could be used as the point of calibration, but so could obeisance to a Sultan and geographical origin, the feeling of misery and depression, and the distrust of Chinese. Many and varied were the possibilities of definition; differences concurred in one point at least: the Malay language was what all Malays shared — the idea of adherence to Islam and Malay customs did not become more prominent until later, and was to lead to discussions on yet another level: which Islam, which customs?

Malay nationalism was primarily defined in terms of language, so to speak; on the basis of language not only the nationality of the Malays could be defined but also the identity of those who were termed *pendatang* (newcomers) and should make themselves familiar with the children of the soil. Of course it was not a matter of language alone; Malay nationalism is also a tale about race and economy in which the British masters, driven by their sympathy for the Malays as well as by their fear of communism, were to play an strange role, to put it mildly: too easily they dismissed the efforts of those who, using capital and repression as their main tools of analysis, tried to build bridges between the races, the cultures, the ethnic groups that somehow had to find ways to live together on the Peninsula.

When in 1957 Malaya became an independent nation and Kuala Lumpur was made the capital of the new kingdom, many government offices were moved there from Singapore. Kuala Lumpur became the center of culture and intellectual life. Also the newly founded Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka moved its office; so did some of the leading newspapers and publishing houses, and with them the tastemakers of literary life. In Kuala Lumpur, Usman Awang, Samad Ismail, Keris Mas, and Asraf found kindred spirits at the newly founded Universiti Malaya; Kassim Ahmad, Ismail Hussein, Taib Osman, Syed Husin Ali were equally vociferous and persuasive in their claim that Malay was to extend its role in daily life on the Peninsula and that Malay poverty should be solved.

In 1960 PENA was founded, Persatuan Penulis Nasional (National Union of Writers), an association which united Malay intellectuals who, perpetuating the ideals of Asas 50, were of the opinion that Malay language and literature should play a central role in the formation of the national culture of Malaya and that this formation could impossibly be seen in isolation from the situation in society. Very effective indeed in its efforts to keep language and literature in the center of attention of political life, PENA managed to acquire a central place in the discussions

and disputes not in the least thanks to the easy access its leading members had to the mass media. The press played a very important role indeed in the construction of a Malaysian identity. Newspapers and journals offered ample space not just to creative work but also to polemics about literature and culture; by doing so they greatly contributed to charting cultural territory, creating a canon, determining the subjects of conversation.

Literary life took shape around the continuous polemics about the role of the author in society; the role of Malay literature as an instrument in national development and nation-building; the role of Islam in the arts, in literature, in society; the role of those who were regarded as not being children of the soil and therefore could be forced to make use of Malay, the national language, even if they did not feel like it. Singapore seceded from Malaya. The northern parts of the island of Kalimantan (except Brunei) joined the Federation. Tensions built along ethnic, if not racial terms. The reorientation of Islamic groups on the Peninsula merely sharpened the conflicts between Malays and "the others."

May 1969 is usually seen as a break in the history of Malaysia as the kingdom is now called: tensions exploded in the streets of Kuala Lumpur and disseminated from there, forcing the political elite to reformulate its aims and targets in favor of the so-called Malay element of the Kingdom's population. A new economic policy was formulated and then implemented, favoring the Malays over "the others" more actively than ever before. One of its implementations was of particular importance for literary life: more emphasis was to be laid on the use of Malay as a national language; concurrently governmental policy aimed at discouraging the use of other languages, i.e. English, Chinese and the various Indian languages. But what kind of Malay, what kind of spelling, which script? And how to impose them?

The history of the language policy and language engineering in Malaysia remains to be written; as a matter of fact, it is amazing how few concrete data about this sensitive subject can be found in the writings of Malaysian language experts up to the present day. A fact is that Malay became, first, the national language ("Bahasa Kebangsaan"), and then Malaysian ("Bahasa Malaysia"). Another fact is that the Romanized or European script gained the upperhand over the Arabic script. A third fact is that after 1969 the government made more serious efforts than before in making Malay the language of all citizens of Malaysia; the question whether this language should be called Malaysian or Malay remained unresolved. A fourth fact is that Malay intellectuals on the Peninsula had the feeling that the form of Malay that was made the norm for writing was based on "Sejarah Melayu," a prestigious collection of tales on the rulers of Malakka which had been retained in the form of manuscripts since the 16th century. A fifth fact was that this norm of writing Malay should become the norm in speaking Malay as well and that it should compete with local dialects. And in recent years these facts are gradually overshadowed by yet another fact: the use of English is actively propagated by the government once again out of fear of losing contact with developments in the world at large.

One of the more successful endeavors in foregrounding the use of Malaysian on the Peninsula was the formal cooperation with Indonesia in the field of language planning that was

initiated not long after the military coup in Jakarta in 1965. In 1972, the spelling of the two normative forms of Malay ("Malaysian" and "Indonesian") was made uniform so that, it was hoped, the exchange of ideas and books would run more smoothly than before — a very sensitive subject, unresolved until today. Committees were revitalized in an effort to standardize technical terms in Malaysian/Indonesian. The exchange of students, artists, and workers has intensified. And discussions about language and culture in Southeast Asia continue to fill many a page in newspapers and journals.

In the Malayisation of the Peninsula and the northern part of Kalimantan literature was given high priority, too; *sastera*, the artful use of language, was still regarded one of the most effective instruments in creating the projected all-Malaysian identity. Newspapers and other periodicals published all sorts of short stories, serials and poetry. Next to PENA, GAPENA was founded, an association of intellectuals and writers who gave a new impetus to the efforts of keeping literature in the center of cultural life. An ever growing number of literary awards and writing competitions was instituted. The publication of "novels" and collections of short stories was stimulated. In the late 70s the honorary title of National Author ("Sasterawan Negara") was initiated. At all levels of the educational system, much attention was given to *sastera*. And so on, and so forth.

In its drive to Malayisation, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka gave aspiring and established authors their own mouthpiece. In 1971 *Dewan Sastera* was started, yet another glossy publication, yet another tool to disseminate Malay nationalism and to contribute to the creation of a cultural canon that could express as well as substantiate the cultural identity of Malaysia. From the start, *Dewan Sastera* has been a lively and informative journal; it has played a predominant role in literary life next to literary columns in newspapers and journals. And yet it operates on an island, leaving the core questions largely unaddressed. In how far is *sastera* a relevant medium for spreading the message of nationalism? Is literature an important element in the life of a modern nation, in a society that is more and more propelled by electronics? Are literary issues of crucial importance in effectively discussing and creating a Malaysian culture?

In particular the result of the activities of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, a canon took shape. Surveys of what was termed sometimes "Malaysian literature," sometimes "Malay literature," were published, which then found their way into textbooks and schoolbooks. Literary criticism emerged as a distinct genre. Malay authors were launched, Indonesian authors were foregrounded — Shahnnon Ahmad, Samad Said, Siti Zainon, Fatimah Busu, Anwar Ridwan, Othman Kelantan, Hamka, Takdir Alisjahbana, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Putu Wijaya. Equally important were the endeavors to make work that had been published in the pre-Independence period better known to a public that was no longer as familiar with the Arabic script as it had been in the fifties. Much was written about pre-independence writing, now called "literature." A number of the "older" tales and short stories, originally in Jawi, were republished in Rumi, *Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan* being one of them; they were provided with an introduction about authors and their background. In the same movement, works of the manuscriptal heritage were prepared for publication, also under the name of *sastera*, with (long) introductions

so as to make readers and students familiar with the context in which they had been produced.

Thus newly created works were provided with what could be called a genealogy — Malay literature had not come out of the blue — and the creation or invention of this genealogy became another subject of polemics in the pages of journals and newspapers. Many amazing and exciting discoveries were made, and even now many treasures may still lie hidden in papers and journals that appeared before the war, not to speak of the numerous manuscripts that still await editing and publication. Altogether, Malay writing that had been published on the Peninsula was given a wider reach, a more extensive context; Indonesian writing was given an ambivalent status: it was part of Malay literature, and yet it was not [see Maier 1994].

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Towards the end of the 80s, the dust of these efforts to create a literary past had settled. At least *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Syair Ken Tambuhan* are part of the core of “traditional Malay literature.” Raja Ali Haji and Hamzah Pansuri are the most important authors of the manuscript tradition. Tellers of tales are largely neglected. Modern Malay literature started with Syed Sheikh's *Hikayat Faridah Anom* (1925-1926). In the “handbooks” and publications by those who set the tone, consensus about the character of pre-war writing went, of course, further than this. The following description of Mohd. Taib Osman, one of the most respected scholars on the Peninsula, reads like an apt summary of the ideas that leading critics and scholars share of the new work that was published before the Japanese invasion:

Modern Malay ... literature was regarded more as a medium ... for expressing the writers' ideas about things closely related to his life and his society. Whatever his affiliations — be he religiously oriented or the Malay-educated elite or an English-educated nationalist — he did not treat the novel or short story as a literary form but as a medium to express his thoughts. [Osman as quoted in Johan Jaaffar *et al.* 1992: 26]

In other words, early modern Malay literature was primarily a reflection of daily life on the Peninsula rather than an artful form of language. Notice, in this connection, the suggestion that intellectual life on the Peninsula in late colonial days can be categorized in three main streams [cf. Milner 1995]. Notice that all authors were supposedly males. Notice that these early “modern” authors were allegedly not very much aware of formal issues.

Malay literature had been composed by teachers and journalists who, with limited or no access to English language and literature, more or less leaning on their knowledge of developments in the Islamic heartland, were forced to develop their own style of writing. Of a loose construction these tales are, not to say inconsistent and full of narrative holes; events are presented in a racy and bumpy style, lacking the stiltedness of their Balai Poestaka contemporaries on Java, and the (usually straight) narrative line is constantly interrupted by teachings and counsel of how the Malays should resist the British, the Chinese, and their own feelings of being in an economic and cultural crisis. In pre-war writing, prose was much more

important and more effective than poetry which consisted of hardly more than monologic exclamations of beautiful words that may have enriched the language and strengthened the individual soul but were not very effective in telling its readers how to get their act together and make changes in the depressed situation.

And depressed the Malays were, in the view of these authors. Miserable, badly in need of education, and poor. In retrospect "The poverty of the Malays," the essay that Za'ba published in 1923 in the *Malay Mail*, reads like a set of prescriptions for many writings to come:

The Malays as a whole are a particularly poor people, poverty is their most outstanding characteristic and their greatest handicap in the race of progress. Poor in money, poor in education, poor in intellectual equipment and moral qualities, they can not be otherwise but left behind in the march of nations. . . . The poverty of the Malays is an all-round poverty. It envelopes them on every side.

Grim and somber the situation was thought to be, and much had to be done in order to uplift the Malay race, the Malay nation. This feeling of depression could serve as an explanation for the question of why most of the tales, full of wandering and desperate protagonists, have a happy ending: solutions should be offered to the Malay plight. Time and again, pictures are given of how Malay protagonists land in problematic situations — the painful result of British, Chinese and royal activities — and eventually find a way out so that they live happily ever after. Realism prevailed, always with a clear message. "We do not want more of those war stories," wrote a journal for short stories in 1939 in its first volume; "we do not want stories of gods and goddesses dying and coming back to life and other stories like myths; what we want are stories that contain moral lessons, examples of daily life as we know it today." The new writers meant to take over the torch of the tellers of tales, it seems, equally teaching and pleasing their public — but in their excitement of exploring reality in writing, of describing daily experiences and events in the shadow of newspapers, their attitude towards the heritage of manuscripts as well as towards the tradition of the tellers of tales remained a largely unreflected one.

For long, *Hikayat Faridah Hanom*, in installments first published in 1925-1926 in Arabic script, has been presented as the first tale of the new kind — and to make it different from everything that was written before, it was called a "novel." The tale is situated in a kind of never-never land, modern-day Cairo, Egypt, and some critics have suggested that it is a mere adaptation of an Egyptian novel; its author, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, has gained such an authority that the assumption that he is the first one who wrote a modern Malay novel has not been seriously challenged. As if being the first really counts and as if there were no earlier ones [see Johan Jaffaar *et al.* 1992: 112-126]. Syed Sheikh's main message — the position of women should be improved, a message that was in tune with Islamic modernism of the time — was to reverberate in many a tale to come. In the authoritative survey of new developments in Malay literature that the widely revered Za'ba published in 1940 Syed Sheikh was to figure prominently.

Other leading authors in this newly created canon: Ahmad hj Muhd Rashid Talu, Abdullah Sidek, Shamsuddin Salleh, Abdul Rahim Kajai, Ishak hj Mohammad, Harun Aminurrashid,

Ahmad Bakhtiar, Raja Mansor. A closer look at the criteria that have been used for assessing their importance suggests that quantity counts over quality and that an anti-British and anti-colonial tone is a key for appreciation. Moreover, in order to gain respect, an author should preferably originate from the Malay peasantry rather than from the social elite so that he could present his Malay readers with the problems they could easily understand and identify with. Not surprisingly, the defense of Malayness was regarded the "central theme" of these tales which usually picture the multi-ethnic city life of Pinang and Singapore as the source of all evil as opposed to the pure and pastoral life in the Malay countryside. As Taib Osman's summary in the above suggests, content is what critics and scholars focused on in their canonization; formal features and language remained largely undiscussed, influence and impact were not really examined. Possible connections with manuscript writing and tellers of tales — now the "heritage" — were as little explored as they had been by the authors themselves.

The tales (*Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan* among them) were simply termed "novel," a generic term that was meant to hook them up with modernity, so closely associated with European novel-writing, so that they be read like English novels — which they could not without losing much of their appeal and strength.

Printed in Jawi, the work of these older authors was to drown in developments after Independence, the more so because it would be very hard to show concrete links with the publications of younger authors like Samad Said, Keris Mas, and Arena Wati which, printed in the modern European script, have the work of Indonesian and European modernity for their compass rather than these tales of pre-Independence writers.

And how about the "tradition" of tellers of tales and manuscripts? Anwar Ridwan's *Hari-hari terakhir seorang seniman*, one of the finest tales ever written in Malay (1979), reads like a metaphor of what happened to it: the main protagonist, the teller of tales Pak Hassan, loses his mind and vanishes, as it were, in the air.

* * *

How does *Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan*, published in 1927 and reprinted in 1975, fit in this literary turmoil?

A summary can be short: in a little village lives a young and restless man named Yazid who falls, head over heels, in love with Zamrud, a woman who, some years his senior, has lost her husband and is now carefully guarded by her family so as to keep her good name. So full of love is Yazid that he postpones his plans to become a wanderer and, instead, decides to stay in the village and court Zamrud. Through the good services of an old lady, he manages to come in contact with the star of his heart. As it turns out, love is mutual, and the two have some secret nightly meetings where Zamrud has the greatest difficulties in steering Yazid's lust along the proper lines, and gains his silent respect by doing so. Yazid, unemployed and just hanging around in the village, is slowly losing his mind on the border between boredom and lust. No wonder that his parents begin to worry and tell him to behave. When Yazid does not come

home for yet another night, his father writes him a letter asking him for an explanation. Assisted by a friend-cousin in the neighboring village, the depressed but lustful Yazid writes a reply intimating that it is about time to be married; after another reconciliation with his parents, he frankly tells them that Zamrud is the love in his life. Commotion in the family is the result, but after some deliberations Yazid's parents decide to disregard the village gossip — is Zamrud not just a widow — and give their consent; they send a mediator to Zamrud's family to ask for her hand; then the marriage can take place with all the rituals that go with it so that the couple can at last give in to their desires in the proper manner. They seem to live happily ever after. Yazid now acts as a responsible husband; with the permission of local authorities he opens up a piece of land and, lovingly assisted by his wife, he begins the happy but poor life of a peasant, gaining the respect of his fellow villagers, resisting depression and misery, showing his fellow villagers how to survive.

Just another tale of boy-meets-girl with a happy ending that could teach Malay readers how to solve problems and fight depression. But then, "Tale of youthful love" has its own, distinct peculiarities. Ahmad Kotot's *Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaan* was one of the first tales in print that are situated in contemporary daily Malay life; in giving a loving picture of the life Kotot and his contemporaries were living, it heralded the numerous tales that were to appear in the 30s. Different, however, from these later tales that are mainly located in the big city as well as from writings of old that are located in never-never lands and palaces, *Hikayat percintaan* is fully located in the countryside. It is not the only feature in which the Tale of youthful love was to run against the grain of Malay ideas of telling tales which gained prominence soon after 1927. Secondly, Yazid is younger than Zamrud, the lady of his dreams, and if that is not sufficiently unusual for a Malay tale in itself, the fact that she has already been married before and therefore is the subject of all sorts of gossip and lustful remarks among youngsters in the village makes the match an even more unusual one. Thirdly, the tale shows that young people have their own free will but that this does not necessarily mean that they have a conflict with their parents, leave the parental home and start wandering around the world.

However, the most important difference from the tales that were to come are the linguistic features of *Hikayat percintaan*: it combines manuscript writing with the conversational tone of a teller of tales, and in this combination the tale of youthful love was to remain a unique tale, the odd one opening up discursive possibilities that were never explored to the full.

This tale was written in order to give pleasure to the young children of my people. Hopefully they are interested in getting pleasure from reading religious books and tales, poems and so on, and moreover they should pick up words and intentions that are useful and beneficial; it is like pressing a coconut, throw away the fibers and keep its essence, that is what should be done with the story in this tale . . . so that the children of my people should read this tale as a narrative about someone who acts out his youth.

[Adapun hikayat ini dikarangkan ialah hendak memberi kesukaan kepada anak-anak muda bangsaku moga-moga tertarik hatinya kepada gemar membaca kitab-kitab atau hikayat-hikayat, syair-syair dan sebagainya sambil itu terpungutlah akan perkataan dan maksud yang berguna dan berfaedah seumpama meramas kelapa hampas dibuang diambil patinya, demikianlah juga tentang riwayat di

dalam hikayat ini ... supaya dapat anak-anak bangsaku bacanya bagaimana kisah seseorang yang melakukan perbuatan kemudaan itu.]

Of course it is tempting to read Kotot's tale primarily as a sociological or ethnographic treatise on Malay village life in the 20s. The rumors and the gossip; the economic depression; the boredom; the fear of Chinese intrusions; the movie-shows; the newspapers; the bike rides; the (Malay) houses on poles; village life along the main road; the issues involved in opening up new land; the importance of education and literacy — numerous are the descriptions of daily life in the countryside, here mainly presented from the perspective of a young man who is preparing himself to make the jump to adulthood and is meanwhile haunted by his carnal desires. *Hikayat percintaan* reads like a series of little vignettes of what Malay village life must have been, or should have been like in the 1920s, connected by playful admonitions of the narrator who, moreover, can not resist directly addressing his public with "ah"s, "whaw"s, exclamation marks and "revered readers." The life of a young Malay who indeed acts out his youth; his worries, his restlessness, his curiosity are pictured with casual precision, malicious delight and telling winks by a narrator who gave as much pleasure to himself as to this readers (and listeners). No anthropologist could have made better pictures of the Malay countryside.

Hikayat percintaan keeps telling us that we should resist easy temptations, and so we will: not these very pictures of daily life make this tale such fascinating reading but rather the form in which these pictures are presented. What makes *Hikayat percintaan* so seductive is the fact that its vignettes of everyday village life are presented in such a lively, joking, funny, and hilarious style.

Ahmad Kotot wrote in Jawi; emulations of the manuscript tradition can be heard on almost every page in the frequent use of phrases that clearly echo manuscript writing. Take the phrases, for instance, after Zamrud has taken leave from her host at the wedding party where the two future lovers first set an eye on one another:

Now mention is made of Yazid. When he heard the words of Zamrud, his spirits faded and he fell silent because he realized he would be separated from Zamrud for this day.

[Maka tersebutlah perihal Yazid manakala terdengar akan perkataan Zamrud itu hilanglah semangat dan terdiamlah ia daripada berkata-kata itu karena telah diketahui akan perceraian hari ini dengan Zamrud.]

A sentence that echoes, so to speak, every older *hikayat*, but the exaltation these sublime and balanced sentences could possibly evoke in the public's heart is then immediately broken by words and phrases that in their verbal clumsiness — intentional or not — echo daily conversations and could easily be read as precise representations of what a teller of tales would tell his audience, making them laugh and giggle.

Who knows when the time would come he would meet her again in circumstances like this happy day (such a lovely sight)?

[entah bilakah masanya kelak boleh bertemu seperti keadaan hari berbahagia ini (seronok pandangan).]

The illusion is further subverted when we are told in a series of spunky phrases that Yazid goes home, full of love, and lies tossing and turning on his bed, humming poems to soothe himself with an opposite effect:

... his love and compassion just increased and, more particularly, his lust and desire really flamed and flared. [... bertambah-tambah sahaja kasih sayangnya, istimewa pula sudah bermenyala-nyala benar asyik berahinya.]

From the cool and distant loftiness of a noble knight to the everyday misery of a village boy, from the world of haughty kings and queens down to the earth of depressed farmers in five sentences — and then up again to the sublime of the ancient tradition of writing: “And then the evening fell” [Maka hari pun petang]. And so on and so forth. Up and down, back and forth.

Juicy and funny, racy and agitated, *Hikayat percintaan* is one of those tales which gives the reader an almost concrete taste of the bliss the author, inspired by his main protagonist, Yazid, must have felt in constantly creating illusions and then immediately breaking them. The exclamations “wa!” “wow!” and “I tell you, dear reader”; the sentence structure constructed in apparent improvisation, suggesting a correspondence between writing and speaking; the repetitions with different follow-ups — they are presented in a voice that betrays pleasure and delight. *Hikayat percintaan* reads as if Kotot is carried away by his own pen, playing with what must have been oral forms of telling a tale and perpetuating the tradition of manuscript writing in a sophisticated manner by constantly mixing them with the sounds and scenes of Malay village life. It tastes like a piece of sugarcane indeed.

Once upon a time some time ago there was a widow named Zamrud in a village in a great country, she was twenty years old. And this Zamrud was a dainty and pretty lady, and she had a kind character and her behavior was fine — and that is why she called up the lust and desire of young men who wanted her.

[alkisah tersebutlah suatu cerita pada zaman yang telah lalu sanya adalah seorang perempuan janda yang bernama Zamrud di sebuah desa di dalam sebuah negeri yang besar sedang berumur dua puluh tahun. Maka rupanya Zamrud itu terlalulah molek serta dengan comelnya dan tabiat janda muda ini sangatlah peramah dan budi bahasanya pun elok. Dari karena itulah menarik asyik dan berahi segala laki-laki muda berkehendakkan dia.]

The first paragraph, playfully combining tradition (*al kisah tersebutlah suatu cerita pada zaman yang telah lalu*) with words taken from daily life like *molek* and *comel*, and ending up with the almost vulgar mention of desire and lust summarizes the tone of the tale as a whole; it should have cast a spell over every Malay reader, no matter how unexperienced. This was a new form of writing, vital and daring. Novel indeed.

Only in a very far distance echoes could be heard of the tales that the teller of tales Pawang Ana, Ahmad Kotot's contemporary, told Winstedt and his assistant Raja Ali Yahya. No doubt, Ana experienced the same bliss Kotot had in telling his tales, yet Ali Yahya and Winstedt felt compelled to restyle his creations, presenting them in a form that makes them read like manuscripts. That is why tales like *Hikayat Raja Muda* and *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal*

were doomed at the time they appeared in print; they were part of the "tradition" rather than forebodings of the novel forms of writing.

Syed Sheikh's *Hikayat Faridah Anom* may have tried to break away from manuscript writing by using a novel theme and novel subject matter; however, he kept his language and his plot under strict and stilted control. Kotot went further than this; by choosing a different discursive register as well, his break was of a much more radical character. Splashing out again and again in terms of language, he has the greatest possible difficulties in containing himself and keeping his tale on the straight path, frequently diverting into sidepaths and almost losing his way. The occasionally "whow!" and "well, well!" are needed, so it seems, to blow off steam. More than once it all ends in a stammer:

... in her beauty she looked like a movie actress or like a princess in heaven, but I really know that the heart of youth will burn with passion and desire and so she should not be described further. Everything about her was just beautiful and sweet, her ways of acting could not be criticized in any way, and if we look at her nose, it was sharp like a newly sharpened pen, and her cheeks were like shelled eggs and her tiny lips were sweetly shaped and, and Of course her beauty brightened the heart of Yazid who was full of lust and desire. To put it shortly: "lovely to look at, even though it is only from behind." Well, the author wants to whisper something to the most honored readers. [... adalah rupanya seperti anak-anak wayang atau puteri-puteri kayangan keelokannya tidaklah dapat hendak diriwayatkan lebih-lebih sangat keadaannya itu karena lebih-lebih tahu hal kemudahan yang telah terbakar jantung hati menarik asyik berahi itu. Semuanya elok-elok manis belaka barang tingkah-lakunya tiadalah dapat hendak dicela lagi kalau dipandangkan pula pada arah hidungnya itu mancung seperti kalam diraut dan pipinya seperti telur dikupas dan bibirnya kecil manis-manis rupanya dan dan.... Adapun keelokannya itu memang tercerah pada hati Yazid yang maha asyik berahi itu ringkasan katanya: "sedap dipandang walaupun daripada belakangnya." Wai, ada suatu lagi pengarang hendak bisikkan kepada tuan-tuan pembaca yang mulia.]

It reads like a flash of a trance from which the teller has to regain himself in order to continue the tale. As a result, the grammar is loose indeed, the narrative line somewhat bumpy, consisting of a series of short stories in which the author pulls out all the stops and lives it all up by alternating almost sublime scenes, reminiscent of manuscript writing, with rollicking farces and slapstick and precise presentations of conversations and arguments, with all the linguistic playfulness and inconsistencies that invariably go with such excursions. The result: a spunky narrative, full of traps, snares, and subversions in which Yazid, bullied by his parents, is driven by his uncontrollable carnal lust and Zamrud, guarded by her relatives, succeeds only with the greatest possible difficulties in preserving her self-respect and the tale.

When the two meet in secret for the first time in the heat of the night in Zamrud's room thanks to the good services of the old lady intermediary, the hero starts out to declare his love to Zamrud in words that would have suited Prince Panji; within a couple of lines, however, the stately picture once again lapses to vulgar playfulness.

Oh Lady Zamrud, so beautiful, so noble, verily I say unto you that I came here with the intention and the will of coming to know one another and love one another, at least if you are willing to have me, low and poor as I am ... I realize that I have been hit by a serious heart disease (it is not cured by eating

those peppermints of 30 cents a bottle) really only you, Lady Zamrud, could give an antidote and could cure me so that I feel good ... that is how the tricks sound that a man applies to a woman, he tries to please her, he tries to rip her heart apart and puts the key of his lust in the secret coffin of her womanhood.

[Wahai Cik Zamrud yang cantik lagi berbudi bahawa kedatangan saya ke mari ini bermaksud dan hendak berkenal-kenalan dan berkasih-kasihan dengan Cik Zamrud sekiranya sudah akan saya yang hina dan miskin ini ... maka mengakulah saya penyakit ulu hati yang terkena kepada saat ini (tidak baik dengan memakan ubat peppermint harga sebotol 30 sen itu) melainkan Cik Zamrudlah yang boleh memberi penawarnya dan mengubatnya sampai betah' ... sebegitulah bunyi tipu daya laki-laki akan perempuan iaitu memujuk dan membelah tangkai jantung limpahnya dan memasukkan anak kunci berahnya ke dalam peti rahasia pegangan perempuan.]

Before he is even able to finish his declaration of love and start the action, a civet cat breaks the nocturnal silence; the chickens begin to chuckle, the ducks begin to cackle and Zamrud's parents wake up. In an effort to hide from them, Yazid falls out of the window down on the ground, and in the dark he is unable to find his way ("the path he had used when he came was suddenly full of bushes because he now followed the wish of his feet — and the path that he had made was gone thanks to the Will of the Lord, Praise to Him, may He be exalted"). In complete confusion he soon finds himself in a banana plantation where he, of course, sits down on an anthill. The effect will be obvious, and the young man's misery is complete when he then falls into a well. And so on and so forth.

Zamrud is heavily guarded by her relatives but, intrigued by the young man who is courting her, she manages to trick them all in order to receive him in her room and talk with him in order to get to know him better. She gets in a fight with the old lady who after bringing them together suddenly becomes resentful and threatens to disclose the secret nocturnal meetings; it takes Zamrud quite an effort to soothe her so that another meeting with Yazid can be arranged. Another nocturnal tête-à-tête takes place, and once again Yazid has to escape through the window into the dark. While he is sheltering against the rain under a neighboring house, one of the inhabitants pisses down upon him. Once again the chickens start to chuckle, the roosters start to crow. Once again the villagers wake up. Once again a series of mishaps sets in motion. Yazid discovers his bike is stolen and he has great troubles in coming home. Villagers laugh at him. His angry parents yell at him. When he tries to sing his blues away in poetry, he is disturbed by a nagging sister. The books he reads do not offer him solace for the lust that burns his body. His parents demand an explanation for his strange behavior, and Yazid asks help from his cousin who tells him to tell his parents just a lie to keep them quiet. And so on and so forth. Silly events, yes, but then the pleasure of telling these silly little events — the malice and endearment are dripping from almost every page — is really contagious.

Ahmad Kotot is perfectly willing to admit his pleasure on the last page of the book:

In our readings we should select what is useful, it is like eating a stick of sugar cane: the bad pieces we throw away or we do not chew them, and we throw the fibers away, it is the same with tales and newspapers, we will not buy its truth just like that because authors have different opinions and ideas.

It is in particular the case with this tale: maybe it is not in accordance with the origin of the tale, things have been added, things have been omitted because the author had certain goals and pleasures. [Maka di dalam bacaan kita itu pilihlah pula yang berguna dan berfaedah seumpama kita memakan sebatang tebu dan ada juga yang buruk mestilah kita buang atau tidak dimamah sementelahan pula hampasnya biasa dibuang orang maka begitu juga didalam hikayat-hikayat dan suratkhbar-suratkhbar itu takkan memborong kebenarannya semata-mata disebabkan bermacam pendapatan dan fikiran pengarangnya istimewa pula di dalam hikayat ini barangkali tak berbetulan dengan asal ceritanya sama ada ditambah atau dikurangkan karena mengikut tujuannya dan kesedapannya pengarangnya.]

Pleasure rules supreme, yet in tune with the time as well as in tune with other tellers of tales, it seems, Kotot combines his bliss with his desire to teach. After all, he was a schoolteacher as most of his readers must have known, and acting like an entertainer and a teacher at once he wanted to tell young people not only that they should amuse themselves but also how a normal youngster should behave and how he should not behave. Up to a certain point, the tale's serious parts — the extensive lessons and admonitions: beware of venereal diseases; do not play with girls; make sure you get a good education; respect your parents; try to find your own living — are as ambivalent as the words in the introduction in which the young readers are told in one and the same paragraph they should seriously abide by the rules of proper behavior and yet live their youth to the full and play around. And this ambivalence is hardly neutralized by his equally ambivalent opinion that youngsters should respect their parents as well as follow their individual desires. Only with a strong personal will, dear readers, you can convince your parents of the sincerity of your ideals and dreams. Bumpy and jumpy indeed.

The tale of youthful love has a happy ending, and the teller's sympathies are made clear in the narrative line rather than in the didactic passages that tend to break the tale's speed. Young people themselves should chose their partners — but they should listen to their parents. Old habits should be rejected — but they are an essential part of village life. We should not give in to lust and desire as long as we are not married — but it is quite understandable that we do. And remember, most revered reader, that life is not really a serious matter — until you get married.

Where the original Hikayat's first installment ends and its second one begins is not indicated in the 1975 edition; what is clear, however, is that towards the end of the tale the teller's tone becomes increasingly serious and his style increasingly stilted; the slapstick and jokes that have dominated the time Yazid is courting Zamrud and both are pestered with their desires are slowly petering out toward the point where Yazid is given permission to marry his beloved and real live sets in. When he plans to open up his own piece of land, the worries of daily life start weighing upon him and his wife. Life in the countryside is hard but rewarding if only it is shared in loyalty and love; the fun is over.

And the teller of the tale says that Yazid and Zamrud explained a variety of changes and ideas to the people in their village, and they looked for ways to please and delight the fatherland and they widened the view and interests and so on of the villagers with their knowledge, giving up beliefs and useless habits and footholds and terms that are not in accordance with reason.

[maka kata yang empunya cerita Yazid dan Zamrud itu berbagai-bagailah pula perubahannya dan fikirannya yang dihuraikan kepada segala kaum di dalam kampungnya itu dengan mencari apa-apa jalan kesukaan dan kesenangan bagi tanahairnya dan melapangkan pemandangan dan pemerhatian dan sebagainya daripada pengetahuan dengan membuang kepercayaan dan adat yang bukan-bukan serta pegangan dan perkataan yang tiada bersetujuan dengan akal.]

This movement from slapstick to seriousness in topics as well as in style makes the tale a balanced one, complementing the sweet taste of sugarcane with a taste of dire bitterness, youth with married life. *Hikayat percintaan kasih kemudaaan* is a tale that derives its spunkiness primarily from the shrewd interplay between manuscript writing and telling tales, two forms of Malay which had not been combined before in such a consistent manner; this interplay is occasionally interrupted by stately advice and casual daily conversations. Altogether, the very alternation of registers must have opened the hearts of every reader because of their familiarity and their artful combination, the more so because they are held together by a voice that breathes merriment and bliss. A tale about lust and desire, interrupted by useful and relevant suggestions of how to be a good and decent person in the contemporary Malay world — but these suggestions are drowned in discursive jokes before they become too serious.

* * *

It is this very shameless merriment, this contagious bliss which makes Ahmad Kotot's tale substantially different from almost all the tales that were to be published after 1927 when he asked his revered readers, friends and acquaintances, close by and far away, for forgiveness for his errors and lifted his pen at last.

Ahmad Kotot's book hardly left a trace in Malay writing of the 30s. Laughter faded, so it seems; only in the early tales of Ishak Mohammad it resurfaced for a moment or two, be it in a different form. The Tale of youthful love was not really emulated by anyone, and the fact that Za'ba spent only a single line on it in his pathbreaking survey of "recent Malay literature," published in 1941 is telling: "an 'old boy' of the former Malacca College, Ahmad bin Kotot, who is a teacher in Pahang, has also written a local love-story of nearly 300 pp."

Za'ba's article was the major source of information for subsequent surveys of "Malay literature." Therefore it should not come as a surprise that, for instance, Li Chuan Siu does not mention Ahmad Kotot at all in his survey of early modern Malay literature, which, taking over the role Za'ba's survey had played for some 25 years, in 1966 confirmed the canonization of "early modern Malay literature."

It is apparently in particular due to the efforts of Bakar Hamid, teaching at University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, that the "Tale of youthful love" resurfaced in the 60s. Bakar referred to it in some of his essays about the roots of modern Malay literature. Later he saw to its Rumi republication by, who else, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1975. He added an introduction that tells us how to appreciate this particular tale and how it formed part of Malay writing in the late colonial days. It is an informative introduction, but also a dangerous one.

Kotot's tale was pushed back to the past. It was made a remnant of the past, cold and still.

Kotot's and other people's work, Bakar Hamid wrote, were "trailblazers in the development of our literature to the level it has reached in the present day" [telah mejadi perintis jalan kepada pertumbuhan kesuasteraan kita hingga sampai kepada peringkat pencapaiannya hari ini]. In other words: reading *Hikayat Percintaan kasih kemudaan* should be like reading a part of the heritage of Malay literature (*sastera Melayu*), and Ahmad Kotot is one of the forefathers.

But even in the new script, the script of modernity, the tale went largely unnoticed. *Hikayat percintaan* was perfectly able to speak for itself, but critics did not really know what to make of it, even in its Romanized version. It raised only very few discussions. Kotot's tale was too merry, it seems. There was simply not enough of a defense of the Malay cause in it. It did not picture the Malay depression. It did not contain enough grim complaints and laments about the injustice done to the Malays. It was situated in the countryside rather than in the city. Its protagonists were poor, buoyant, and honest farmers rather than devious, wealthy, and well-educated men and urbanites. Maybe Kotot had simply not published enough to give him a place in the canon. And maybe Seremban had not been the right place to publish tales, anyway.

In recent textbooks and surveys of early "modern Malay literature," Kotot's name is mentioned and discussed, be it only in an almost obligatory manner; after all, it was one of the first Malay novels, and as such it deserves special mention. Its predominant discursive characteristics — its playful form, its spunky voice, its playful alternation of manuscript writing and tale telling — are hardly noticed. The fact that it showed the way to a distinct way of telling tales that was to remain unexploited on the Peninsula was never reflected upon.

The number of laughing books in Malay is small — as if Malay literati have been feeling so heavily burdened by their task of teaching and preaching the struggle for their nation's survival that they forgot that laughing is a great way of survival as well and that chewing sugarcane is a useful pastime. Modern writers, so it seems, no longer know what fun and pleasure are like in the way the tellers of tales do. If anything, Kotot's tale shows there is another way to face misery, poverty, and depression: just laugh and enjoy.

A lovely tale. Never imitated, never emulated. A classic in its own right.

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